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THE TANALA, A HILL TRIBE OF MADAGASCAR

I. INTRODUCTION

The island of Madagascar lies off the southeast coast of Africa, with its long axis running approximately north-northeast by south-southwest. It is the third largest island in the world, with a length of approximately 1,000 miles and an average width of 250 miles. It includes regions of rather diverse climate and natural resources. /131

Along the eastern side of Madagascar, extending almost from end to end, there is a series of mountain ranges. These mountains rise to an elevation of 2,000 meters in places and form the watershed for the entire island. From them rivers flow eastward into the Indian Ocean and westward into the Mozambique Channel. In the north, the mountains are abrupt and rise directly from the sea. As one goes southward, they become lower and less abrupt, gradually dying out toward the southern end of the island, and there is a narrow coastal plain. At the southern end of the mountains this plain turns westward and includes all the southern tip of the island. /133

On the western side of the massif there is a great plateau, also mountainous, which has an elevation of about 1,000 meters in the central part. This slopes off gradually toward the west and south. Along its western edge there are broken mountain ranges, lower than those on the east.

The eastern slope of the massif and the eastern coastal plain are characterized by an extremely hot and humid climate. It rains almost daily during all months. Coast and mountains are covered by a dense growth of tropical jungle, so heavy as to be almost impassable. This is the most unhealthy part of the island and fever takes a heavy toll of both Europeans and plateau natives. /132 [164]

The plateau is characterized by a rather dry, temperate climate with a moderate seasonal rainfall. From late May to early September there is hardly any rain and the temperature falls almost to the freezing point at night. Traditionally, the eastern and central parts of the plateau were once densely forested and this is borne out by the occasional finding of large logs buried in swamps. Agriculture by the cutting and burning method, coupled with cattle grazing, has completely deforested it and most of it is now open grass land. This region is comparatively healthy and there is said to have been little or no fever here prior to the construction of the railroad from Tananarive to the east coast. [137] [496]

132 On the western slope of the plateau and in the extreme south the
137 climate is hot and semi-arid to arid. The ground is covered with clumps of low trees and thorny scrub, interspersed with stretches of grass land. In many places it is difficult to obtain water. In spite
[164] of the aridity there is much fever in this region, making it unhealthy for Europeans.

101 The various environments just described are reflected in the culture of the natives of the different regions. The people of the east coast are mainly fishermen and agriculturalists, with little dependence on cattle. Those of the plateau are mainly agricultural, but with cattle of greater economic importance. Those of the south and west subsist almost entirely on their herds. (For a discussion of these
[113] differences see Linton: Culture Areas in Madagascar, American Anthropology, Vol. XXX, No. 3.)

• [131] The Tanala occupy approximately the southern third of the eastern massif. Their territory lies roughly between 20° 30′ and 22° 20′ south latitude and between 46° and 46° 30′ east longitude. On the east they extend, in places, to within a day's march of the sea, but nowhere reach the coast. On the west and south their territory everywhere ends at the edge of the open grass lands.

As neighbors they have, on the south and southwest, the Bara, who are a cattle people with a culture of west coast type. On the west lie the Betsileo and on the northwest the Imerina, both of plateau culture. On the north are the Bezanozano, of mixed plateau and east coast culture, and on the northeast the Betsimisaraka, of east coast culture. On the east lie three tribes, the Antambahoaka, Antaimorona and Antaifasina, who claim Arab descent and unquestionably have come under strong Arab influence.

177 The Tanala thus lie at the meeting point of four rather distinct types of culture. Influences from all of these can be traced in the historic culture of the tribe. However, the extent and importance of these influences vary greatly in different parts of the Tanala territory. The region inhabited by the Tanala Ikongo, in the south, presented few natural obstacles to invasion and was relatively desirable. It lay between the territories of two unusually vigorous and aggressive tribes, the Bara and Antaimorona. As a result, it was constantly being entered by groups coming from the southeast coast and cattle areas. These conquered and amalgamated with the earlier inhabitants, imposing much of their own culture.

177 The territory of the Tanala Menabe, in the north, was much less
166 desirable. It was extremely mountainous, with almost impenetrable

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On the western side of the divide the forest is lower and more open, resembling moderately heavy second growth timber in the eastern United States. In the bottoms grow clumps of tall raffia palms. Forest and open grass lands meet in an irregular line. This line is the real western boundary of the Tanala country. A few of their villages are in the open, but hardly one is out of sight of the forest.

On the eastern side of the divide there is daily rain at all seasons. On the west there is a seasonal change, comparable to that in the plateau, the rainiest months being December to February. Because of the altitude the climate is temperate throughout most of the Tanala country. During the winter season it becomes unpleasantly cold, with frost in the low places and heavy morning fogs that chill one to the bone. Even in summer it is rarely uncomfortably hot.

Throughout the whole of the Tanala country there is a multitude of streams and rivers. These are mostly swift, with many falls and rapids so that canoe travel is unprofitable. There are a few small lakes. In the bottoms of some valleys one encounters rather extensive swamps, which become impassable during the rainy season.

From the point of view of natural resources, the region is not especially tempting. Wild food is scarce and hard to get and agriculture involves heavy labor in cutting and burning the forest. Grazing is rather poor and cattle do not thrive in such a wet climate. In opposition to this, the forest affords an abundance of good timber, far beyond the local needs, raffia, rubber and other products, and there are considerable deposits of iron ore. The latter are neither rich enough nor extensive enough to be of much value for export purposes. There are also deposits of other valuable minerals, crystal and gold, but these meant nothing to the first settlers. Although there are traces of ancient gold working in many parts of the Tanala territory, the natives do not seem to have mined the gold themselves.

Perhaps the greatest gift which the region offers to settlers is a relative immunity from attack. The terrain makes large-scale invasion almost impossible. Moreover, the country was fairly healthy prior to the opening up of regular communication with the coast. People driven from the plateau could settle in the higher forest without fear of the deadly coast fevers.